Chronic illness, vulnerability and social work: Autoimmunity and the contemporary disease experience, by Liz Price and Liz Walker, Abingdon, Routledge, 2015, 167 pp., £79.49 (Hardback), ISBN 978-0-415-64353-5

In Chronic illness, vulnerability and social work: Autoimmunity and the contemporary disease experience, Walker and Price provide an excellent, thoroughly educational and insightful contribution to the field of disability studies and social work literature generally in an area that is practically unknown. On this point, it can perhaps be suggested that, rather than contributing to an existing field, Walker and Price are, in actuality, breaking new ground and opening up a new area for consideration and debate. This assertion is evidenced by the apparent dearth of relevant social scientific literature that specifically addresses the theme of persons living with autoimmune diseases (see *Findlay, 2014 writing in the US for one of the few available examples*). Their contribution is also undoubtedly enhanced and nuanced considerably by the fact that both authors have personal and direct experience of living with autoimmune conditions. This lends the text a considerable level of depth and insight whilst also allowing the passion of the authors to permeate the pages. However, whilst clearly a labour of love, this does not in any way dilute the scholarly nature of the work, which is well argued and presented throughout and draws on a range of theoretical frameworks which help to elucidate the issues discussed. The core of the author's thesis is heavily reliant on data drawn from a qualitative study in which persons who have been diagnosed, and who have begun living with lupus, were interviewed. Excerpts from this study are threaded throughout the text.

The authors begin by exploring different facets of the contemporary disease experience. Chapters one to five neatly and viscerally encapsulate the realities experienced by those suffering from autoimmune diseases such as lupus, rheumatoid arthritis and multiple sclerosis. The ambiguity and uncertainty around receiving a clear diagnosis as well as the

unpredictable nature of such conditions, which can seemingly veer from almost dormant to extremely aggressive overnight, is starkly described. These early chapters also make abundantly clear the inexorable reality of living with a condition where the immune system—the very thing that should protect us—becomes an 'aggressor within' and the cause of the illness and suffering. The considerable effects that these processes have on identity are explored in-depth. A further theme, introduced early on, and returned to throughout the text, is the role of the body and the concept of 'bodywork' in social work practice. The authors argue that is an issue of significant import and one which may have become eroded in social work practice as a result of the dominant policy paradigms which have guided the profession throughout the past twenty-five years. There is a clear criticism here too of the medicalisation of disease and of the failure of medical professionals to see beyond the medical condition to the wider social and economic factors that may effect and exacerbate the difficulties of those suffering from autoimmune diseases.

Having clearly set out the main themes of the text the authors then set about exploring a number of key areas where they are likely to be prominent in the lives of sufferers. For example, in chapter seven, the authors take a very interesting look as the concept of sufferers possessing a 'digital illness'. Here they discuss the source of support and solace—but also the sense of hopelessness and fear—that the internet can provide. In chapter eight, the authors explore the role of the family in the contemporary disease experience as well as the considerable effect of the latter on the former. Here they explore the shifting roles and identities that the presence of a chronic illness can create, as family members become informal carers for loved ones and roles such as breadwinner or caregiver are sundered and often reversed. The clear social and economic impact that this can have on families is brought to light by the testimony of many interviewees. Before concluding, the authors explore, in greater detail, a theme that features prominently throughout the text by examining the role of

the body in social work. Here they argue that social work has been legislatively and theoretically removed from the realm of the 'body' and that by reclaiming the 'body' social work can begin to assert itself anew and to challenge more dominant professional paradigms. However, the authors acknowledge that this presents a considerable challenge and more clarity as to how this is to be realistically achieved, and what it would look like, is undoubtedly needed. It is also notable that the interviewees referenced in this chapter are largely unaware of social work as service from which they could benefit and that those who have considered it see a largely therapeutic role for the profession. This would suggest that a challenge lies not only in claiming or reclaiming the 'body' in social work practice but also in fostering a greater public awareness of the profession outside of the traditional milieu with which it is generally associated.

With this text, Walker and Price have made an important and distinctive contribution to knowledge. It offers a fascinating and often harrowing account of the reality that is faced by those who live with autoimmune diseases. It is very well written, theoretically rich and thoughtfully constructed and presented. The overarching strength of the book is undoubtedly its uniqueness in breaking new ground which, it can be hoped, may ultimately help to begin fermenting a discourse around the pertinence of the role of the social services within the context of the contemporary disease experience.

However, conversely, the very thing that gives the text its strength may also turn out to be a weakness of sorts. Walker and Price have entered new territory here, both practically and academically, the danger is that they may remain there alone. Practically speaking, the authors, and many of those they interviewed, make the point that, far from just being a neglected cohort, dedicated social services aimed at persons who suffer with autoimmune diseases do not exist. On the academic side, the traditional areas of 'risk' in which social services intervene (*e.g. child protection; mental health; disability; substance misuse;*

domestic violence; old age) tend to remain somewhat fixed over time, with the vast bulk of new literature being produced tending to remain situated in these specific areas of practice. For these reasons, it is clear that Walker and Price have undoubtedly entered niche territory. It is to be hoped that, as well as being a salient entry, this book will also become widely disseminated as it certainly deserves wide consideration. It can certainly be recommended to students or practitioners in the areas of disability studies, social work and other relevant disciplines.

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References:

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